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Review of THE SALT ROADS by Nalo Hopkinson

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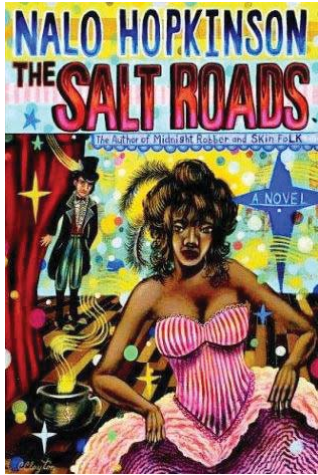


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The Salt Roads Nalo Hopkinson

New York: Warner Books, 2003;
paperback, 2004.

ALTHOUGH Samuel R. Delany, Jr. has been publishing sci-fi/fantasy since the 1960s and Octavia E. Butler since the 1970s, and both were included in and thus canonized by the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1999), still only a handful

of Black novelists work the field. Notwithstanding their canonization, their studied interpolation of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation into their novels, and the potential the genre has for shaping our hypertext, Internet-driven world, this state of affairs still obtains. Nevertheless these are heady times, as the other Black sci-fi novelists such as Jewell Gomez, Stephen Barnes, and Tananarive Due are joined by new energy and talent. The publication of *The Salt Roads* (2003), the latest novel by Jamaican-born, Toronto-based Nalo Hopkinson, is certainly one of these.

Hopkinson is no stranger to speculative fiction or literary acclaim. Her first two novels, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Midnight Robber* (2000), both garnered her numerous honors and distinctions. She has also done much to increase the number of Black writers in the field, as evidenced by her publication of several award-winning anthologies featuring her fiction as well as that of other voices writing in the diaspora. It's with some irony, then, that she published *The Salt Roads*, a novel which may have left its sci-fi/fantasy roots behind.

For sure this novel is a continuation of her fecund imaginary, which draws upon themes and motifs frequenting her fiction, commentary, and interviews: A rich, creolized vernacular narrative which is the powerful substratum situating her readers within the context of a West Indian (female) perspective, and drawing an abundance of much-deserved critical attention to Hopkinson; West African deities (loas), as routed through the Caribbean, who make cameo appearances and

reinforce the matrix of fantasy, theology, magical realism, and horror driving the (sub)plots; the re-creation of independent Black space in the form of communities troubled by inner turmoil, whether from cupidity, infidelity, or difficulties of hybridity; and, of course, the cross-roads of racial and gender-based oppression exemplified by her female protagonists, who are always trying to find their voices and places within the troubled purlieus shaping their lives.

Where *The Salt Roads* differs is in the shift of generic form it represents. Although, paradoxically, Hopkinson has extended her range and depth, this novel is much closer to being standard, literary fiction. It is, depending on one's critical preference, an historical novel, neo-slave narrative, or allegory of a slave narrative situated within the space masterfully created and probed by some of the very best Black women's authors. *The Salt Roads* also draws upon a blues and jazz vernacular to enrich its literary impact. If Hopkinson's novel invites comparisons to Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), it is worthy of the company, for she has achieved a literary depth lacking in her sci-fi/fantasy novels. This is not to downplay their value, for they are the sisterly precursors of *The Salt Roads*, which owes much to them. However, because Hopkinson was less concerned about creating a farscape, futuristic intrigues, and fantastical beings, she could use the powerful, expansive ideas behind her prose to effect a deep character study.

Or at least deeper, for *The Salt Roads* features three mortal protagonists—Mer the Ashanti-born, Santa Dominique-enslaved healer, Jeanne Duval, the mulatta lover of Charles Baudelaire, and Thais, a sex slave of ancient Alexandria, Egypt—who are bound by the bitterness of life and the salutary potential of the meandering, salty flows of the earth, which a fourth immortal protagonists represents. Just as former Black fantasy author Charles R. Saunders recognized in Butler a true raconteur in 1984 (Bell 91), the label easily applies to Hopkinson, who manages some powerful storytelling here. What author wouldn't when she expertly excavates the ancient Roman empire located in Alexandria, Egypt, and the Holy Land of Jerusalem, walks readers through Napoleon's empire in France and the West Indian French colonies, and includes a fist fight, of sorts, between two West African deities of fire and water?

But these are just the background to a rich, episodic narrative structure which foregrounds the trope of the salt roads, the rivers/oceans for

sure, but also the flows of and through women's bodies across time. These flows are personified by the her-stories of Mer, Duval, and Thais. Mer, whose personal deity (*lwa*)¹ is Lasirèn, the river-goddess, must struggle in a pre-revolutionary Santa Domingue (eighteenth-century Haiti). Also known as Matant, Mer is an healer and lesbian who plays a significant role in the awakening of the African cultural roots leading up to the island's independence and renaming as Haiti. Duval, who is also known as Prosper and Lemer, is a beautiful dancer and courtesan of Baudelaire, the French poet. Intersecting as it does with Baudelaire, who's poetically inspired by her, and a young Jules Verne, her life in the modern metropole is compelling even as social enslavement slowly unravels it. Finally, there is Thais, a half Nubian, half Greek named Meritet by her parents—who sold her into slavery. Through her experience as a sex slave, Hopkinson re-creates Alexandria and its splendor, then sends Thais on a dusty, serio-comical “pilgrimage” of sorts to the Holy Land, where she becomes St. Meri/Mary.

Slavery undergirds the novel, of course, but not in the obvious ways. Yes, there's the brutality of plantation slavery and the freedom impulse it inspired, but Hopkinson is less interested in large historical events than in the lives of three ordinary, yet extraordinary women. Through their bodies Hopkinson meticulously explores the psychological colonization slavery and male hegemony imposed, critiques the role of Christianity and the cultural practices of traditional African societies, and details the serious psycho-social and physiological dysfunctions (incest, self-loathing, diseased bodies) they entail.

Hopkinson creates this mind bender with a graceful, lyrical touch as sweet as her protagonists' stories are bitter. At first that is, for they begin salty, tragic, until they flow to something healed and better, like Mer/Matant tending to her wounds:

In my hut, by the light of the oil lamp, I crumbled dried mint leaves into pig fat from one of my calabashes. I laved my hands in the cool grease that smelled sweet of mint; into the cracks in my fingertips and my dry hand-backs. Then I rubbed my aching feet with the ointment, dirty as my foot bottoms were. A soothing thing. Mint makes your eyes see clear, too, if you drink a tea made from it. Calms the stomach and clears the brain. (309)

¹*Lwa* seems to be a phonetic variation of *loa*.

Still, no matter how sweet and refined the hand, Hopkinson has packed in a load of complexity which no 392 pages could easily hold. The difficulty is particularly keen since, unlike the overlap of the her- and histories of Morrison's *Beloved*, for example, Hopkinson's protagonists not only never meet, but are separated by great temporal and spatial divides. To prevent all of these stories and issues from becoming too attenuated, Hopkinson fuses the short-story anthology to the novel by using an episodic, intermittent narrative technique that is at a far literary remove from her previous work. The disorienting bite of this experimental approach, and the sometimes graphic sexual content, are eased by the tender, lyrical prose and gripping stories which force one to continue reading as the textual puzzle delightfully unravels. Moreover, Hopkinson fills the vast space between her characters by binding them with common names (Mer, “sea,” Lemer, “the sea,” and Meritet), concerns, and problems. But Hopkinson's most brilliant stroke is the interpolation of a trans-historical, spiritual presence, alternately named Ezili and Lasirèn, who operates throughout the novel as a separate character, a narrator-commentator, and sister-goddess who can be part of each protagonist at the same time she is herself.

In *Midnight Robber*, the narrator was a.i. (artificial intelligence), which was the Nanny for the protagonist of that novel. Although Nanny is a nod to the Anansi spider web of African lore, there is nothing artificial/technical about the narrator Hopkinson uses in her latest novel. Although *She*, as a goddess, is futuristic, as in past, present, and future, She keeps Her readers solidly grounded in the pains and joys of Black women's courses on the salt roads of life.

References:

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